Singita

WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA
For the month of September, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four

Temperature		**Rainfall Recorded**	**Sunrise & Sunset**
Average minimum:	16.5˚C (61.6˚F)	For the month: 6.0	Sunrise: 05:46
Minimum recorded:	10.0˚C (50.0˚F)	Season to date: 467.8 mm	Sunset: 17:49
Average maximum:	29.1˚C (84.3˚F)	(*Season = Oct to Sep)	
Maximum recorded:	40.0˚C (104.0˚F)		

The month of September holds major significance in the southern hemisphere as it marks the start of spring. This season, above all others, is the most noticeable as change can be seen in all the elements and biotic components. Trees that have waited for the onset of extended daylight and warmer temperatures now commit to producing their fresh foliage that provides shade and nutritious food for those so dependent on their being. Familiar melodies join the dawn chorus as more and more warm weather visitors fly south in search of better feeding and a chance to breed. Looking closely on the sand two-tracks we drive we start to see evidence of where reptiles have made their dash across the open path to an alternate refuge. The dry months prior to the

turn of the season have been hard on the herbivores and has offered the predators and their young a chance to regain their condition before the green season starts. For our guests there is nothing more engaging as seeing nature's will and composure amid testing times. These subtle changes are happening daily as they gather momentum in this continuous cycle of life.

Here is a recap of our wildlife viewing for September:

Cheetahs

- Undoubtedly the highlight of September has been the Makatini female cheetah and her three cubs. She has been given this name to aid us on research of her movements throughout the region and hopefully help us get a better idea of how far she moves. This name stems from the Swahili word for "grounded". Consistent viewing of her and her cubs has resulted in the best cheetah viewing on Singita in recent years. We have watched her hunt and catch impala, found her feeding on existing kills made in between game drives and, most recently, divert a pack of seven wild dogs safely away from her cubs hiding in the grass. On some days we have had her and the territorial male cheetah seen on the same drive. It appears the litter of cubs is composed of two males and their sister.

Leopards

- The Nkuwa female leopard has yet again been trying to entice the three-and-half-year-old Ntomi male which, according to literature, is not fully sexually mature or considered a "resident" male. His large stature bodes him well in potentially keeping his home range until he matures.
- The two young males of the Nkuwa female have been spending most of their time along the Sand River close to the confluence of the Mobeni River. The sightings of these individuals have been separate from their mother and are often found by themselves. They are now entering the nomadic period as newly independent leopards. A challenging time for these felines with many uncertainties ahead of them.
- To the north of Ebony and Boulders Lodges the Hlambela male has pushed further east up towards Rangers' Rock. Some mornings we can hear as he roars periodically while patrolling along the Sand River displaying his presence to other male leopards.
- Thamba male leopard seems to be moving towards Khoza Pan more and more on his patrols. His large spoor that can be seen on prominent tracks and pathways have helped us get an idea of exactly where he moves, even when he has not been seen.

Lions

- The Tsalala lioness and her growing cubs, two females and a male, have been seen every day of the month. Her hunting ground along the sand river has everything she needs, which is places of refuge for her cubs while she hunts the abundance of small to medium sized herbivores that need to come to the river for food and water. In one week, we recorded her with four kills, two impalas, and nyala bull and a warthog, which was captured in front of Boulders main deck and carried back east closer to her cubs. She has also been seen with both the Plains Camp male lions making for unbelievable viewing.
- We have noticed the two Ximungwe lionesses and their two older cubs of ten months frequenting the western parts of Singita's stretch of the Sand River more and more. For quite some time it was the two younger Othawa lionesses that were often found in that area, but they have seemed to be pushed north by the growing pride of four.
- One standout morning regarding lion viewing was sighting five different prides all in one drive! The Nkuhuma Breakaway brother and sister hunted a kudu bull which attracted the attention of the Mhangeni Pride who chased them off and finished the kill, only to have the Kambula lions move into the area following the vultures descending on the leftovers. The Othawa lionesses were seen at Ingrid's Dam and the Tsalala Pride close to Boulders Lodge, also on the same morning.

African wild dogs

- The Othawa Pack has been moving with all ten of their pups. The pack now numbers 17 and has been viewed hunting in the central west to the south on Singita. Many of the herbivores are feeling the impact of a hot, lingering dry season that has been unforgiving for many plants-dependent mammals, and the wild dogs, like many of the predators, have regained their condition after a good rainy season at the beginning of the year.

Elephants

- The increase in daytime temperatures has ushered many herds of elephants to their favourite mud wallows, mostly along the Sand River where permanent water can be found. We have also seen an increase in bull elephants, some of which boast impressive ivory tusks. With knobthorns and marula trees starting to grow new leaves they are attracting these heavy-weights from far and wide.

Buffalos

- The large herd of buffalo are now numbering close to 1 000 members and covering big stretches of ground to find grazing. It is during this time of the year when it is not uncommon to see them browsing on new green leaves to supplement their diet.

Birds

- We did not record any new species for the year this month and our total sits at 288 for 2024. We have been delighted to see the return of the yellow-billed hawks and Wahlberg's eagles, back to breed. Along the river we have noticed common and wood sandpipers returning as well. The birdlife has been on overdrive with plenty of courtships and breeding happening.

Unusual sightings

- The turn of the season this time of year is arguably the best time to see the biggest variety of shy, nocturnal animals, and the numbers don't lie. Looking at our daily sightings report show that honey badgers have been seen far more than any other month thus far, foraging during daylight hours. An increase in insect activity is a possible cause.
- We had one pangolin sighting which also led to Ross finding a caracal while on his way to join the sighting.
- Other small cat records for September include African wild cat and serval.

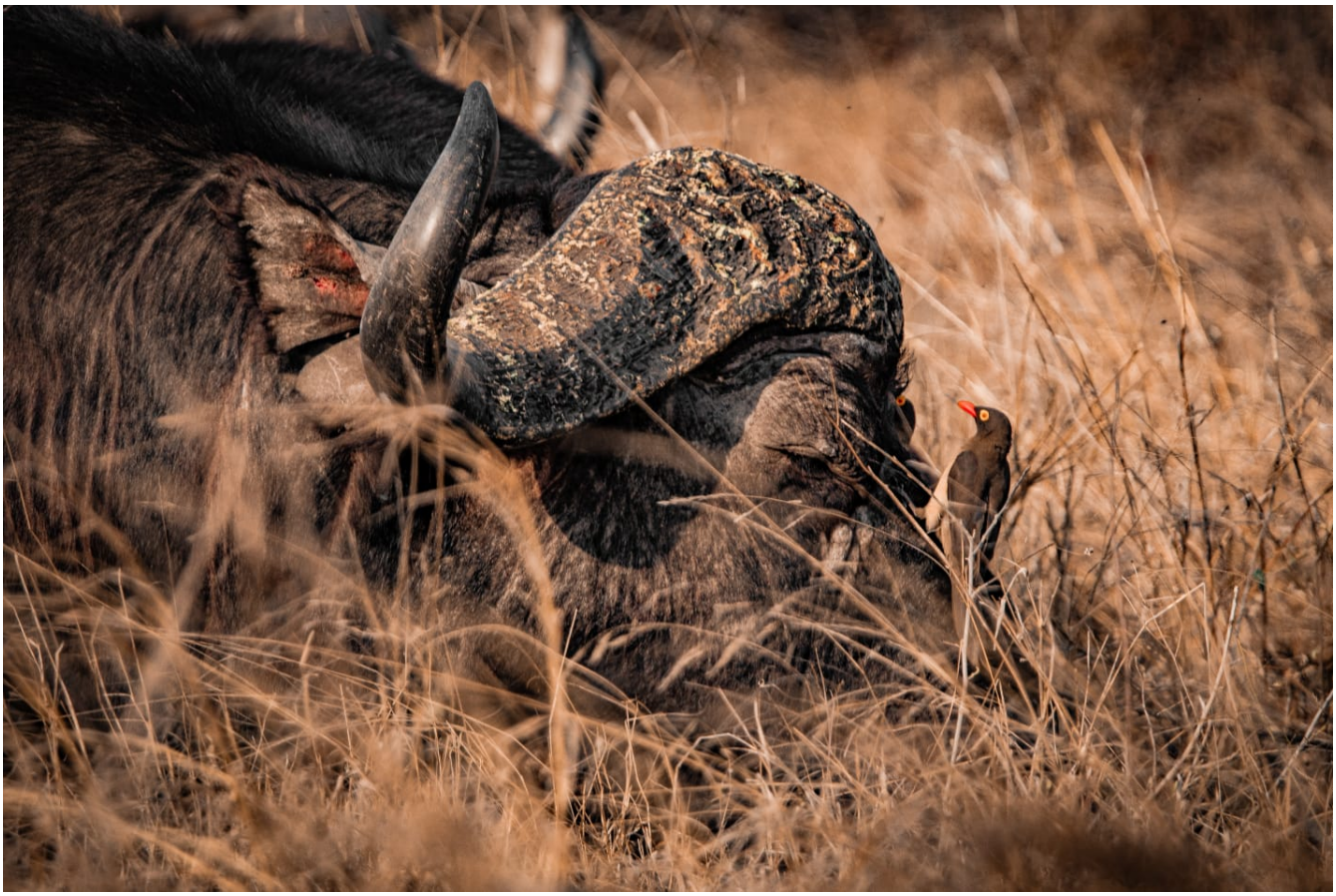
Some Bush Stories follow, as well as the September Gallery of images.

The southern plains of Singita Sabi Sands **Article by Dan Hartman**

Guests are often taken aback by the sheer and rather rapid change in landscape and inhabitants when exploring the southern/central parts of our custodial gem that we call home.

Among its most impressive inhabitants are the large Cape buffalo herds that traverse the savannas, sometimes numbering over 1 200 individuals per herd. These herds are not just a spectacle of sheer numbers; they play a pivotal role in shaping and maintaining the landscape and influencing the dynamics of both flora and fauna within the reserve.

One of the most fascinating behaviours exhibited by these buffalo herds is their practice of rotational feeding. As they move en masse across the plains, they graze intensively on the mixed-veld grasses, which might seem detrimental at first glance, as the wave of the large herd marches through. However, this process stimulates new grass growth, particularly in areas with cotton soil - a type of clay-rich soil known for its fertility when properly managed. The heavy grazing pressure removes older, less nutritious plant material and allows sunlight to reach the soil surface, promoting the germination of fresh, nutrient-rich grasses. This regeneration is crucial for maintaining the health of the grasslands, ensuring that they continue to support a diverse array of herbivores.



An interesting observation can be seen by looking at the shape of their hooves. They even-toed ungulate's holes resemble two back-to-back figure of sixes that maneuver up and down ever so slightly and, in turn, bed the seed bank as they move through the land, thus ensuring the best chance for the next seasons conditions for germination.

The movement patterns of the buffalo also inadvertently create and maintain belts of clearings throughout the bushveld. As the herd forages, they trample smaller shrubs and saplings, preventing these areas from becoming overgrown. These open spaces are essential for other grazers like rhinos, and sprinters like cheetahs. Rhinos, being bulk grazers, benefit from the accessible vegetation, while cheetahs utilise the clearings as hunting grounds where they can leverage their speed to catch prey.

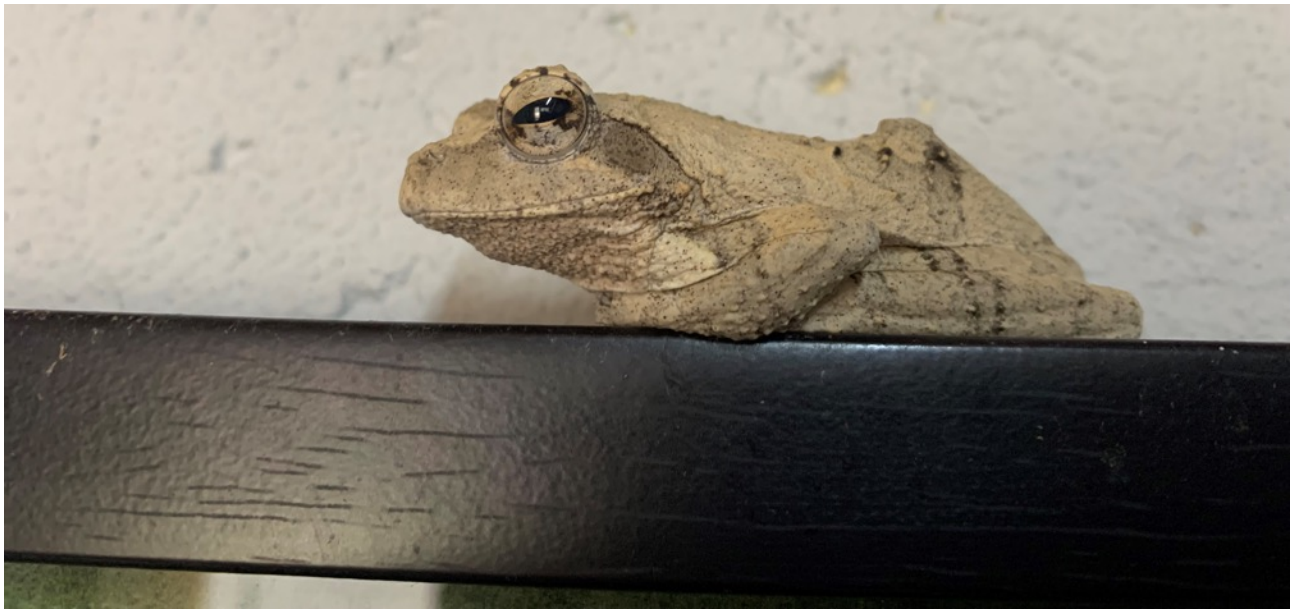
Moreover, the presence of such large buffalo herds has a significant impact on the predator-prey dynamics within Sabi Sand. The sheer size of the herd and the biomass it represents act as a magnet for larger predators, including lions and hyenas. Predators are drawn to the opportunity to hunt, which can lead to intense interactions and even influence pride territories and behaviours. This not only maintains the ecological balance but also enriches the biodiversity of the area.

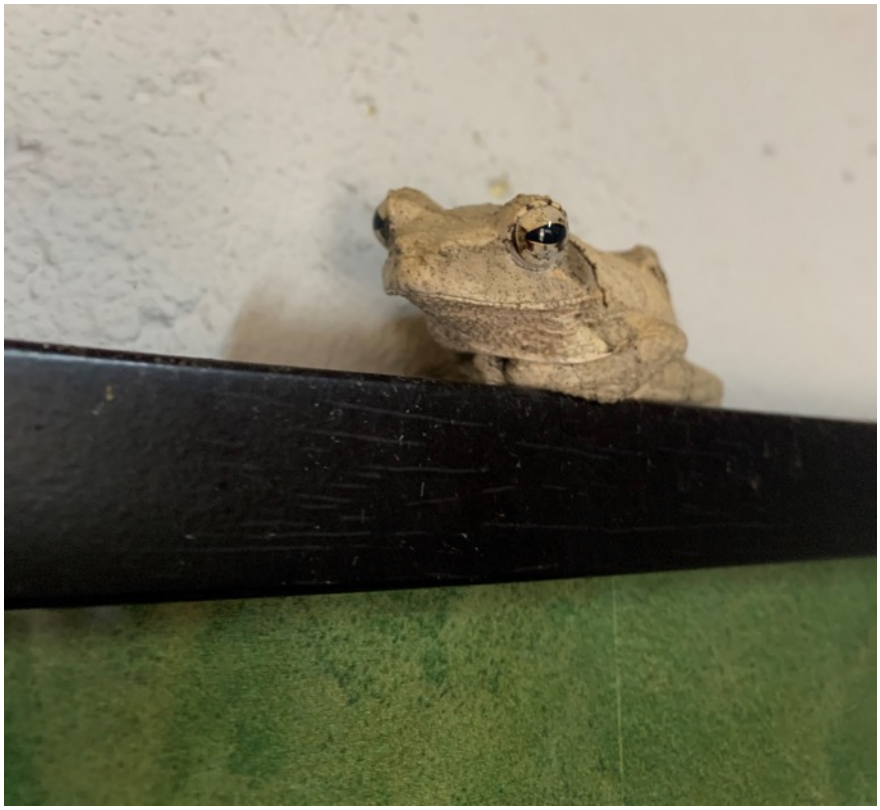
As the day wanes, witnessing the sun setting over the African horizon, with the backdrop of a dust cloud raised by the mass movement of the buffalo is an unparalleled experience. The golden hues of dusk filter through the dust particles, creating a surreal landscape that epitomizes the wild beauty of the African savanna. This daily ritual is more than a visual masterpiece; it symbolizes the enduring cycle of life and the interconnectedness of the ecosystem.

The large buffalo herds of Sabi Sand are a cornerstone of the region's ecological health. Through rotational feeding, they rejuvenate grasslands and promote biodiversity. Their movements shape the physical environment, creating habitats for other species, while their role in the food chain sustains predator populations. Observing these dynamics offers invaluable insights into the complexity of natural ecosystems and underscores the importance of conserving such magnificent landscapes for future generations.

Oh, to be a frog on the frame **Article by Marc Bowes-Taylor**

As Singita guides we hold ourselves to a high level of professionalism, and rightly so. However, just like you and those who surround you, we are merely human. Being able to unwind and offload is a prerequisite to a healthy life so there are times when we do just that. A fly on the wall may get to hear gossip, home-truths and secrets, but in our case it’s a frog on the frame…





If animals could speak, namely this foam-nest frog, we would have a lot of guides' blush.

Why this one you may ask?

Well, from somewhere around May we had noticed a southern foam-nest frog *(Chiromantis xerampelina)* perched on a frame right above a computer in the guides' office. It has offered us great learning as it has not moved - except on one occasion, observed by Head Guide, Marc Eschenlohr, when it ventured about three feet to the desk below before returning, up until now, the month of September. It is a true survivalist with amazing adaptations to living during a warm winter with no rain, year after year. This, however, is beside the point.

This frog has been present, day in and day out, behind the scenes, witnessing all sorts of antics and stories. Not all of us have been overjoyed by Freddy, yes that's its name. One of our guides, Coman, refuses to sit at the computer below the amphibian as he fears it and its cultural significance to him. We all have taken an interest in this frog in some way or another, wondering how long it will stay and what will cause it to move - most likely the first decent rain when it heads off to find a mate.

The guides' room is home to many post-drive debates, funny stories, teasing, and resolving of work-related issues. So, Freddy hears these and the personal stories and challenges that we all experience in our lives. Even the tribulations in our local love for our sports team often has Quentin and I blabbering away for ages. I wonder what the frog thinks of all of this? Why does it choose to spend its period of aestivation in our presence? Perhaps it's not Freddy's first visit to the guides' office or maybe he was bored of by the lack of gossip and bad jokes elsewhere?

I believe that letting the mind wander and exploring our imagination is crucial to our personal well-being, so I hope you've enjoyed me sharing this daydream!

The crucial role of smell in the lives of animals in the African bush **Article by Kayla McClelland**

In the vast and untamed wilderness of the African bush, the sense of smell is one of the most vital tools for survival and communication among its many inhabitants. From predators to prey, and even social animals like elephants and primates, the ability to detect and interpret scents plays a crucial role in navigating this unpredictable environment. For many animals, scent is more than just a way to find food - it is a complex language that conveys messages about territory, reproduction, and even danger.

Many animals rely on pheromones to communicate with others of their species. These chemical signals are often secreted through glands or left in urine and faeces, and they provide a wealth of information to one another.

Scent as a hunting and territorial tool: Lions and leopards rely heavily on their acute sense of smell to navigate their surroundings. Lions, being territorial, use scent-marking as a communication tool, rubbing their faces on trees or spraying urine to define boundaries. The Jacobson's organ in lions allows them to pick up pheromones from other lions, especially females in heat, contributing to their social dynamics. Likewise, leopards, with their stealthy nature, use smell not only to locate prey from miles away but also to detect rival predators and avoid unnecessary conflicts. Both species use scent to claim territory, using olfactory markers to warn competitors.

Elephants - olfactory experts: Elephants, possessing one of the most advanced olfactory systems in the animal kingdom, use their versatile trunks to detect a range of scents, from water sources to predators. With over 2 000 olfactory receptors, elephants can communicate through chemical signals carried by the wind, even from distant locations. Scent plays a role in maintaining herd cohesion; family members can detect each other from miles away. During mating season, male elephants can smell a female in oestrus from great distances, ensuring they don't miss an opportunity to reproduce.

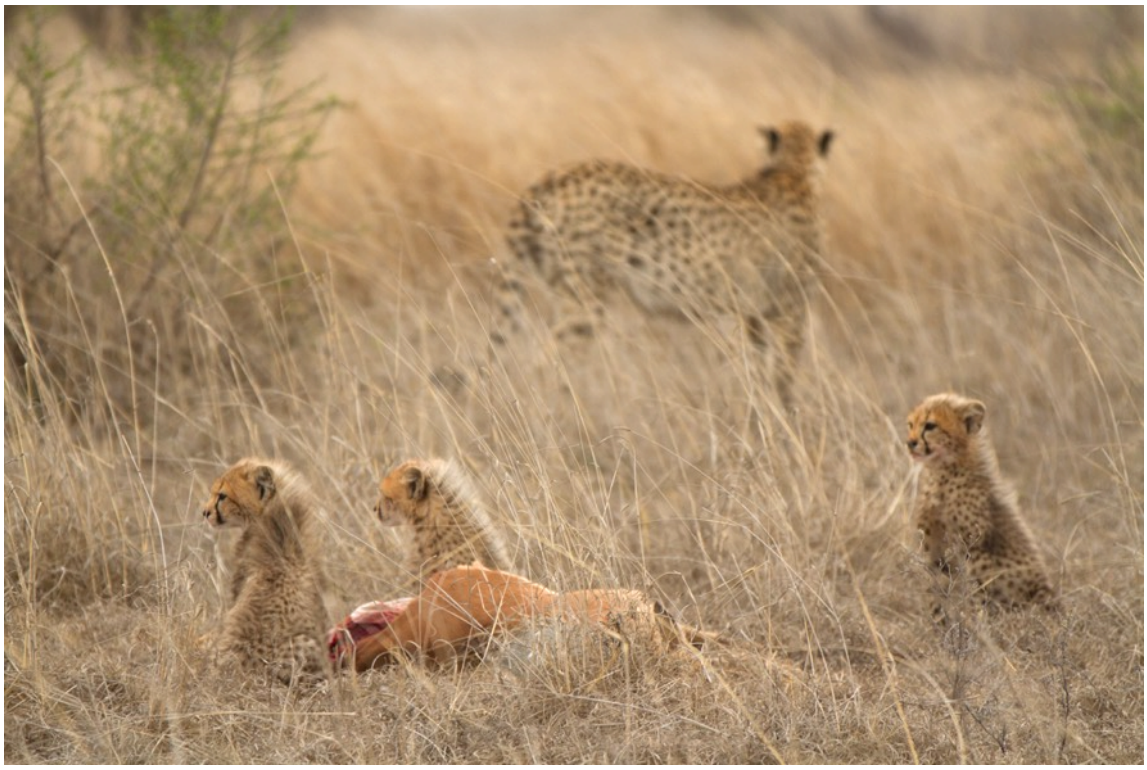
Buffalo and rhinoceros - scent for defence and navigation: Buffalo and rhinos, both with strong olfactory abilities, depend on scent for survival. Buffalo uses their sense of smell to detect predators and communicate within their herd. This collective detection system allows them to swiftly respond to threats like lions. The rhino, on the other hand, relies on scent for navigation due to its poor eyesight. Rhinos mark their territories with dung and urine, and their keen sense of smell helps them avoid conflicts with other rhinos while also finding mates in the dense bush.

Smell for communication and social bonds: Beyond hunting and defence, smell serves as a vital communication tool in the social structures of animals. Many species use pheromones to send messages about territory and reproductive status. For example, elephants use their acute sense of smell to recognize family members and maintain herd structure. Similarly, African wild dogs and primates rely on scent to maintain tight social bonds, with wild dogs leaving scent trails for pack members during hunts, and baboons using smell to communicate social status and well-being during grooming sessions.

Prey detection and predator avoidance: Predators like lions, leopards, and hyenas use their sense of smell to detect prey, especially in challenging environments like dense brush or during the night. On the other hand, prey species such as antelope and zebras use scent as an early warning system to escape predation.

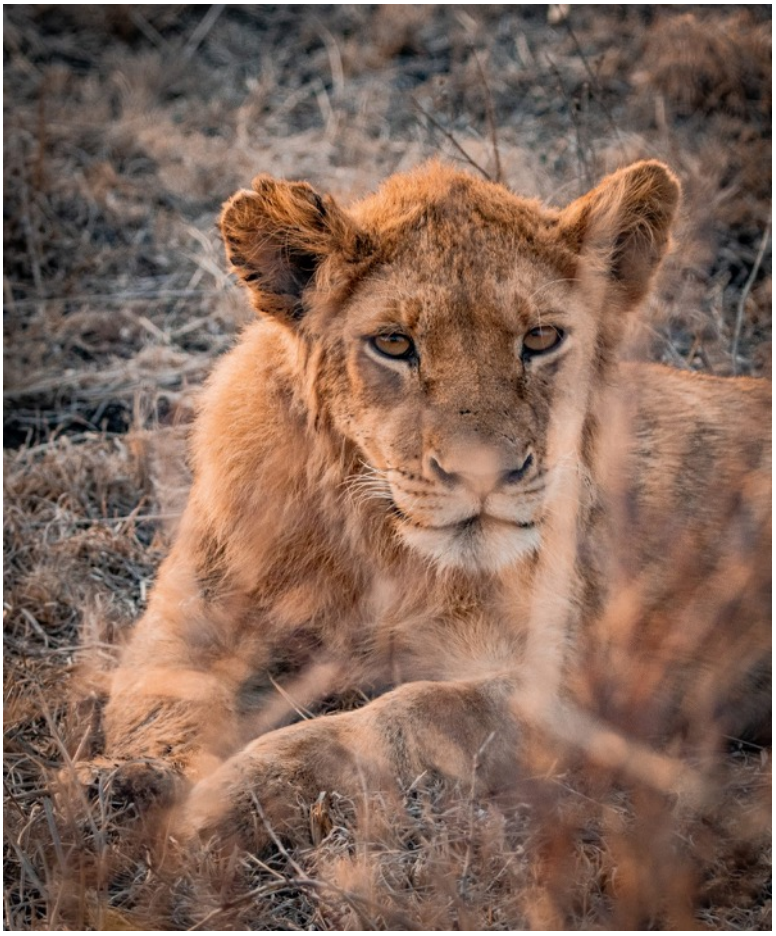
The sense of smell is a powerful, multifaceted tool that shapes the lives of animals here at Singita Sabi Sand. Whether it is used for hunting, avoiding predators, marking territory, or maintaining social bonds, olfactory communication is a vital adaptation for survival in one of the world's most challenging environments. Through their sophisticated use of scent, animals in the African wilderness ensure they can thrive in a constantly shifting landscape.

September Gallery

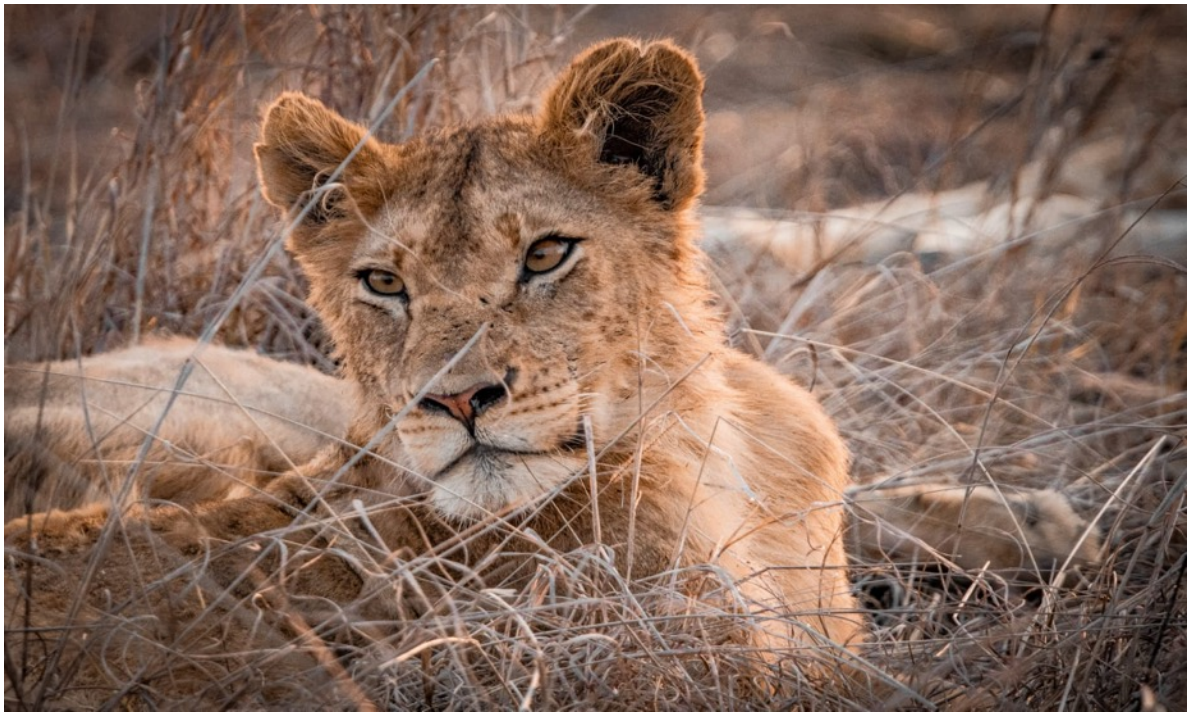


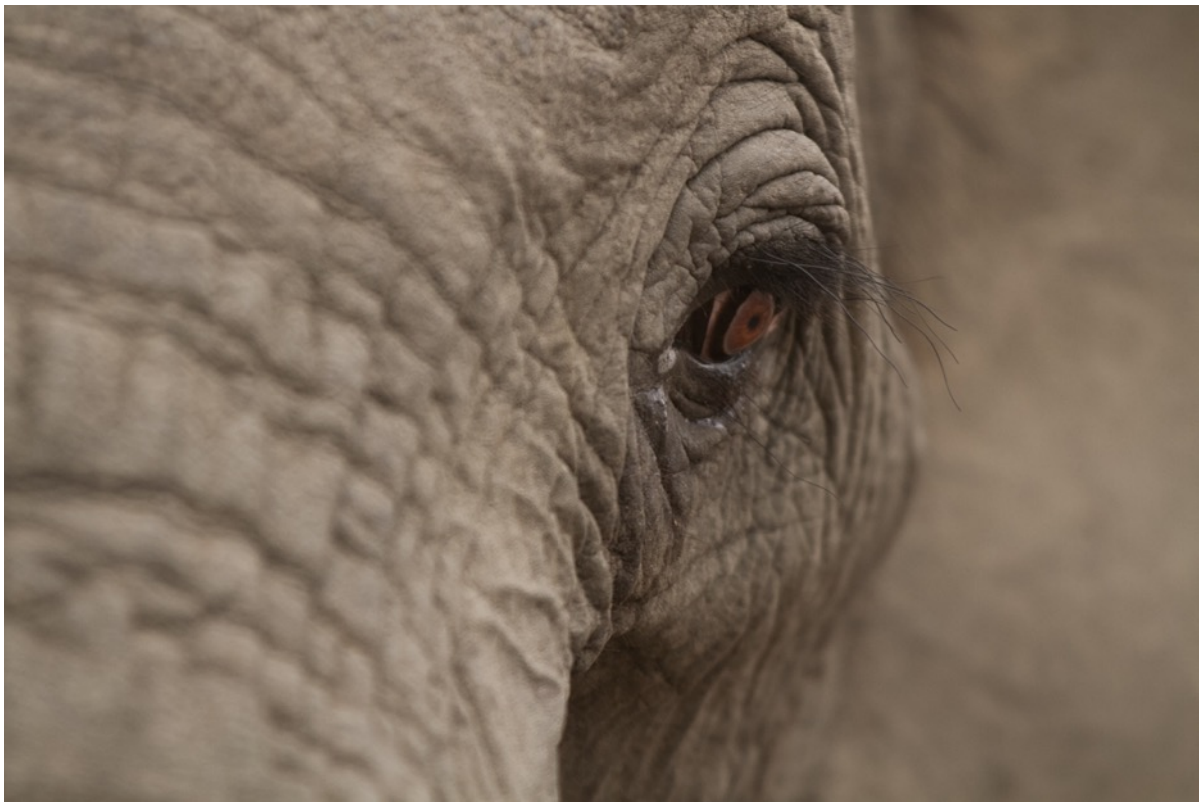
The Makatini female cheetah surveys the area while her cubs pause briefly. Image by Marc Eschenlohr.

What is more than likely a once-in-a lifetime shot, a mother cheetah, her three cubs and a male cheetah lying together. Males play no role in raising the cubs. Image by Marc Eschenlohr.

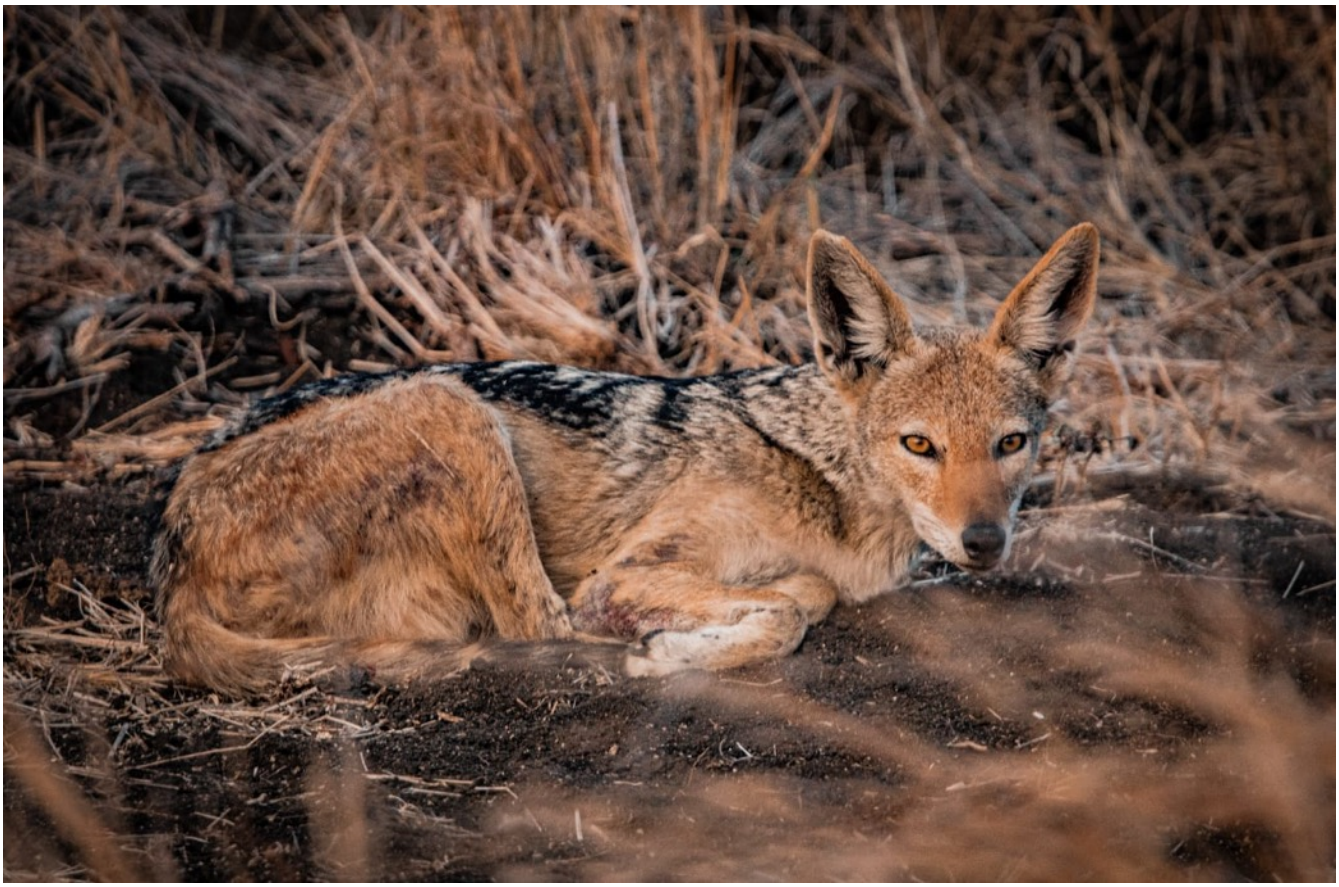


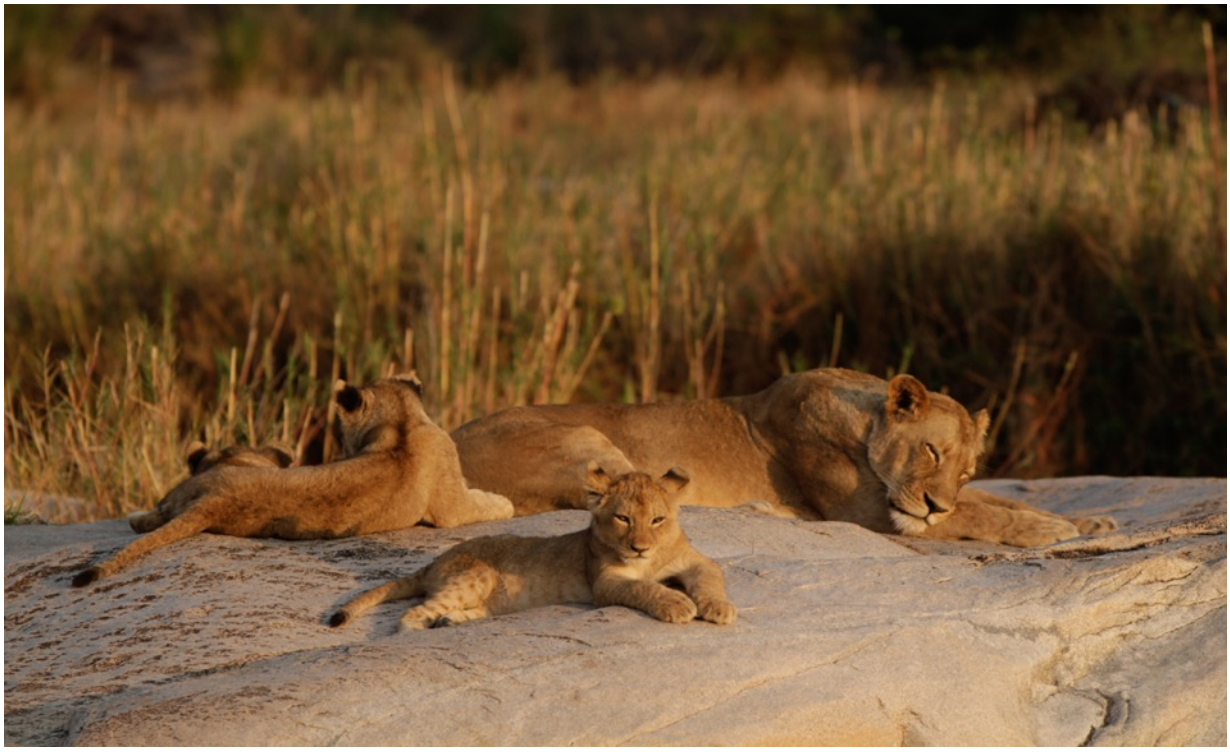
The Mhangeni cubs providing us with some photographic opportunities. Images by Jono Harper.



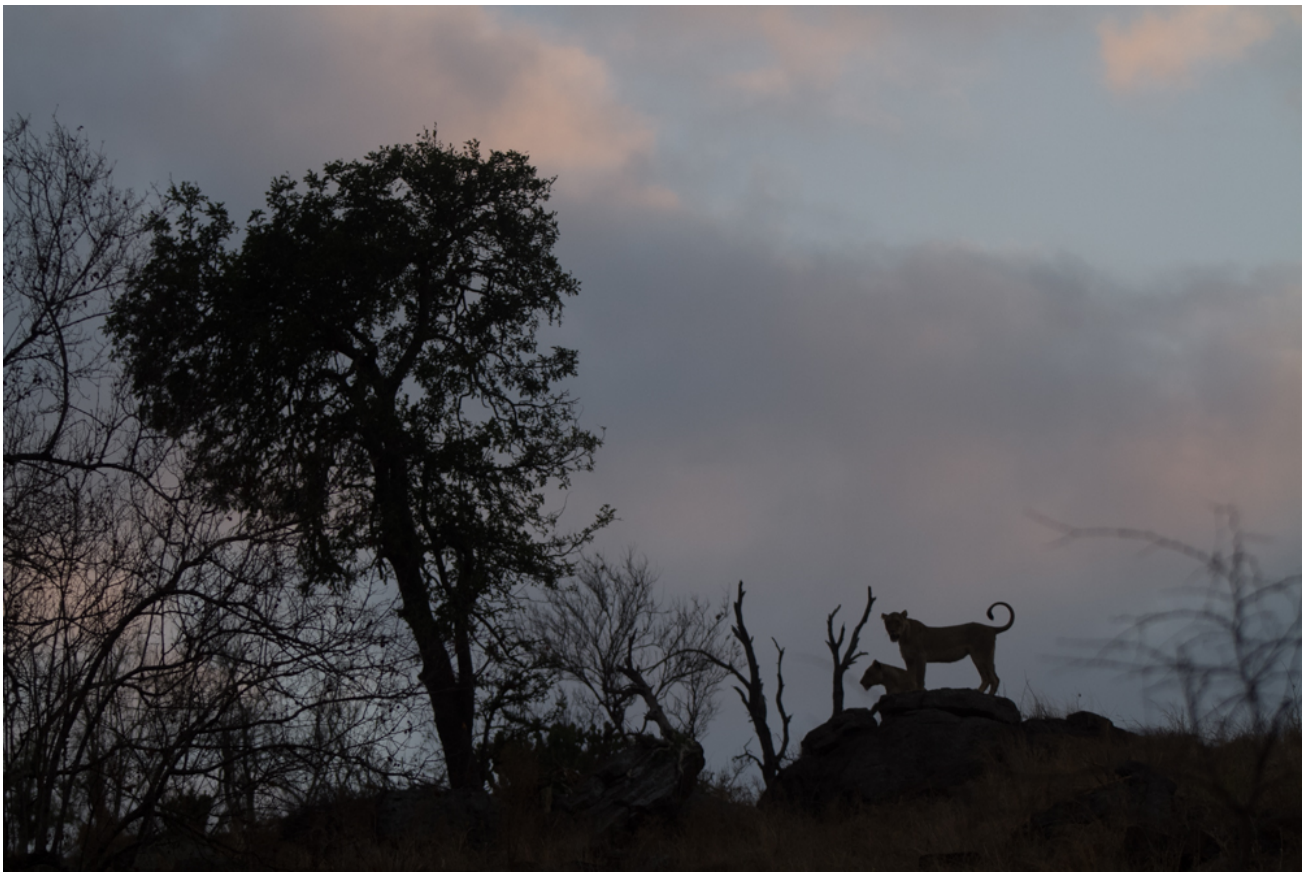


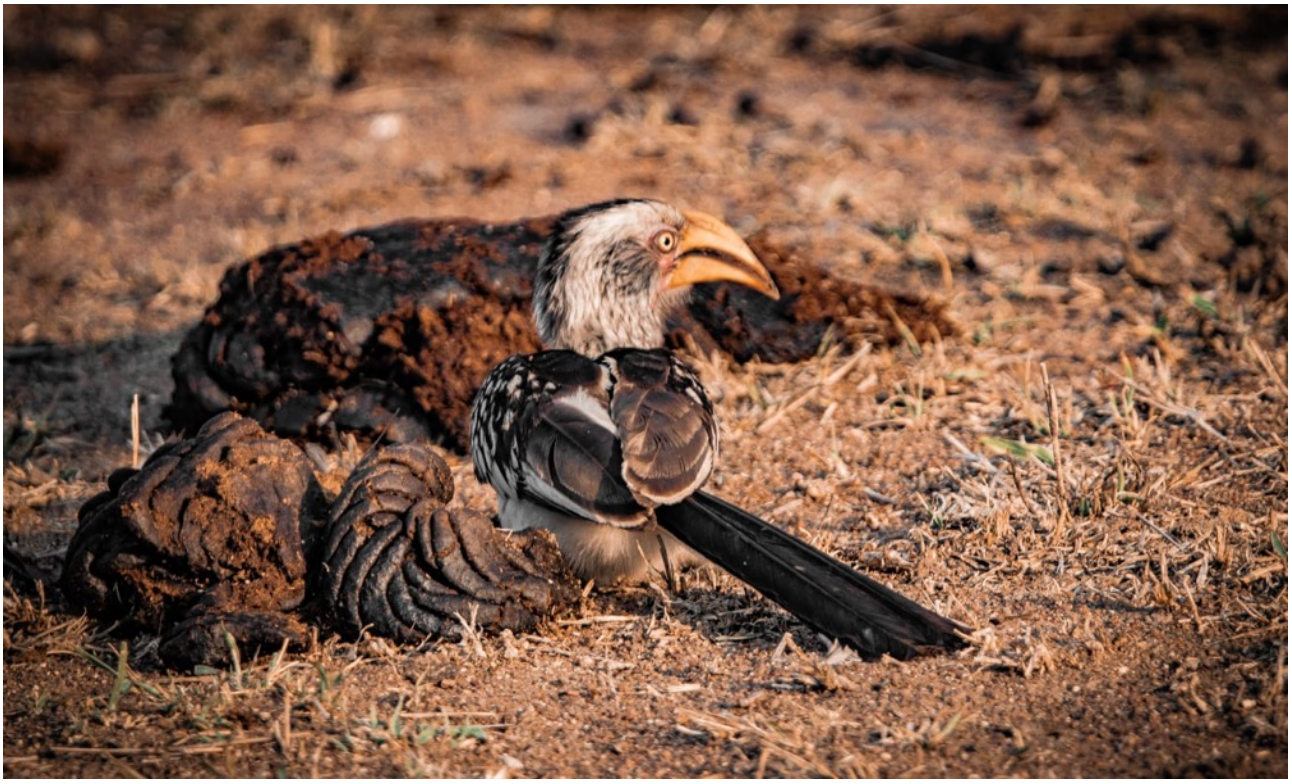
A sensitive image captured by Marc Eschenlohr of the details of any elephant’s eye.
A black-backed jackal watches us cautiously while hunkering down. Image by Jono Harper.





What has been a typical scene of late, the Tsalala lioness and cubs in the Sand River during the day (above), and at night she escorts them to the safety of the rocky outcrops (below). Images by Marc Eschenlohr.





A Yellow-billed hornbills looking for insects around the buffalo dung, a microhabitat. Image by Jono Harper.
"What you wanna do?" "I dunno, what you wanna do?" Image by Marc Eschenlohr.